

## The Prohibition of Instrumental Music

By: Cantor Paul Kowarsky

Our psalms abound with expressions enjoining us to praise the L-rd with song and the melodic sounds of musical instruments. "Sing unto G-d a new Song," since the kingdom of G-d has been established. And everyone must participate.

"Shout for joy unto the L-rd all the Earth, break forth into exultation and sing praises." Nature too will join in praise to G-d: "Let the sea roar and the fulness thereof, the earth and all that dwell therein. Let the floods clap their hands, let the mountains exult together." (Psalm 98) And we are required to praise G-d with instruments too. Psalm 150, which forms part of our daily service enumerates an extensive array of musical instruments to be used: "Praise Him with the sound of the Shofar, praise Him with the harp and lyre. Praise Him with the stringed instruments and the pipe. Praise Him with the clear-toned cymbals; praise Him with the loud-sounding cymbals." And yet, the sole remnant of the Temple instruments seems to be the bells on the crowns of the Torah.

Since so many instruments were used in the Temple Worship Service, the question naturally arises: Why is there such a complete prohibition of the use of instrumental music in the Synagogue Service? The *Chazzan* in the traditional Synagogue is not accompanied by instruments when leading the Service. Does the prohibition of "*Mashmia Kol*" (not causing an instrumental sound to be heard) apply also to the pitch pipe or the tuning fork, used by the *Chazzan* and Choir Director to find the correct starting pitch? Since the pitch pipe does make a sound which can be heard by the Congregation, some will only use the tuning fork. Yet other *Chazzanim* will not "make a sound" even by striking the tuning fork, and they use a particular type of wrist watch, which constantly "hums" a certain note instead of ticking. At the beginning of the 19th century, the first organ was introduced into a Reform Temple Service in Berlin. The Rabbis of the time issued a ban against it, on three grounds:

The playing of musical instruments is prohibited on Sabbaths and Holy Days; Music in general is prohibited on religious occasions as a token of mourning for the destruction of the Temple; and The introduction of the organ is merely an imitation of Christian Worship. It is noteworthy that a strict interpretation of the ban would prohibit the use of the organ even on weekdays (say at a wedding ceremony), since that contravenes the second and third grounds of the ban. Is the use of musical instruments within the spirit of Jewish worship?

In the mid-19th century, the Stockholm Jewish Congregation wanted to introduce an organ at services. Two outstanding secular Jews were asked for their opinions: the brilliant German Jewish poet Heinrich Heine (1797-1856) and the most famous Jewish composer of the time, Jacob Meyerbeer (1791-1864). Heine's reply was: "The G-d of Israel does not wish to be worshipped with brass, but with human voice." Meyerbeer felt that the use of the organ was not in accordance with the spirit of Jewish worship.

These replies are supported by Jewish tradition. In Genesis Chapter IV v.21, we read that Yuval, the son of *Lamech* was "the father of all who handle the harp and pipe." This, according to Dr. Hertz, teaches us that music, according to the Hebrew tradition is the

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most ancient art, dating from the beginnings of the human race. But *Rashi* comments that the purpose of the invention of these instruments was *Lezamer Laavodat Elilim*, "to sing to idols." That comment seems to me to indicate that musical instruments in the worship of G-d is excluded in Judaism.

Let us look at one of the masterpieces of classical musical creativity to try to rationalize this attitude. Beethoven's Ninth Symphony is unique. After the first three movements played by the Symphony Orchestra, the orchestra is superseded by human voices in the fourth movement; the choral singing of the Ode to Joy. This transition from instrumental to vocal sound is introduced by the Bass who sings: O Friends, no longer let those sounds continue! Let us sing something more pleasant, more full of gladness and joy, let us praise Thee. There are those who strongly believe that the true meaning of this introduction is that no instrumental music, however melodious and beautiful, can mirror the intricate passionate expressions of joy and suffering as does the soul-stirring sound of the human singing voice.

Is this therefore not the reason why, although musical instruments were permitted in the Temple, they are forbidden in the Synagogue? In the Temple service, the worshippers were relatively passive participants: the priest performed the sacrifice; the Levites sang prayers and were accompanied by numerous instruments.

The Synagogue makes no distinction between Cohen, Levite and Israelite in communicating with G-d through prayer. Every worshipper is required to participate actively, and in such participation, the instrument is a hindrance rather than a path to the establishment of communion with G-d. Even as Psalm 150 lists the various instruments to be played for *Halleluhu* ("Praise Him") the Psalm ends and with it the Book of Psalms, with *Kol Han'shama T'hallel Yah, Halleluyah*: "Let every soul praise the L-rd." And when we praise G-d from the soul, there is no need for instrumental embellishment- *D'varim Hayotz'im Min Halev Nichnasim El Halev* teaches the Hebrew Proverb: "Words which emanate from the heart penetrate the heart" of the listener, and we use *Div' rei Shirot V'tishbachot*, words of song and praise, to serve G-d from the heart.